

Pandemic Flu Planning and the Department of Veterans Affairs Overview

Influenza, the “flu,” is a febrile (fever-causing) respiratory illness caused by an influenza virus. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) takes seriously the threat that influenza – both seasonal flu and pandemic (avian or bird) flu – poses to our veteran patients, our staff, our medical system, and the Nation and is taking several actions against this family of diseases.

Seasonal flu is a form that regularly circulates in humans, usually in winter, and that vaccines are developed against annually. Seasonal flu can cause significant illness and in some cases death. VA actions against seasonal flu include the following measures throughout the medical system:

- Providing annual flu vaccination to patients and staff under the mandate of an annual VHA Directive.
- Setting goals (including performance measures) for flu vaccination..
- Sending and promoting the use of a VA Influenza Toolkit of guidance and material
- Disseminating VA Influenza Vaccine Advisories (seven in 2004-2005 and two so far in 2005-2006) to provide essential updates, including changes announced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and interpreted for VA.
- Encouraging prevention of infection via sustained promotion of handwashing and respiratory hygiene and development of personal protective equipment (PPE) information for medical facilities. (Campaign called “Infection: Don’t Pass It On” was launched in fall 2004.)

Pandemic flu occurs when a flu strain new to humans quickly emerges and cause widespread illness. This new strain can originate from the resorting of human and animal, such as **bird or avian**, strains that leads to sustained human-to-human transmission. (Resorting has not happened yet with the current H5N1 avian flu, but the potential is there.) These new strains are dangerous because humans have little pre-existing immunity to them, because vaccines may not be immediately available, and because antiviral medicines may be less effective than for seasonal flu. Past influenza pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss. VA actions against pandemic flu include development of a Plan that will be part of the National Pandemic Influenza Plan. The goals of VA’s pandemic influenza plan will be to:

- Adequately prepare the VA health care system for the possibility of pandemic influenza
- Minimize illness caused by pandemic flu among veterans and employees
- Keep the VA health care system fully operational in the event of a pandemic
- Provide patient assessment and care to veterans with or suspected of pandemic flu
- In conjunction with National Plan, provide appropriate prevention and treatment for veterans enrolled in the VA care, including use of an antiviral medicine (oseltamivir) and vaccination (when available)
- Provide real-time clinical data to CDC for ongoing disease surveillance

The current *components* of VA’s pandemic influenza plan are:

- Use of VA annual influenza program as a foundation in terms of leadership, communications, policies, procedures, and systems
- Maintenance of a stockpile of oseltamivir (550,000 courses purchased in fall 2004) and development of a plan for distribution of it.
- Design of a study to see if oseltamivir can be extended by co-administration with probenecid (which can slow elimination of some drugs) and possibly extend the effective supply of this drug, which is made by one non-US drug company. (Study awaiting FDA approval and VA review and funding)
- Development and dissemination of a Respiratory Infectious Disease Emergency Plan for Facilities to become part of the Emergency Management Guidebook of the Veterans Health Administration (VA – the health care system)
- Provide appropriate VA-wide education and training on pandemic influenza.
- Continued active promotion of measures to prevent infections via routine hand and respiratory hygiene and use of PPE as needed
- Participation in White House and Federal planning (National Vaccine Advisory Committee and Pandemic Flu Planning Groups)

VA Internet information on influenza appears at <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/flu/>.